

denied their proper place in America's melting pot. We need to remember that America owes these men and women the best it can offer because they have given us the best they could when America was in need.

Mr. Speaker, I am fortunate to have The Houston Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center located in my congressional district. Having just celebrated fifty years of service to the veterans in the Houston community. Some 1,646,700 veterans live in the State of Texas alone. The Houston VA Medical Center expects to receive and serve over 50,000 veterans in this year alone. I expect this measure to improve the quality of life for all our veterans who so proudly served our nation.

Mr. Speaker, this bill is important not only because it provides for the needs of our veterans today but because it sends an important signal to the men and women serving our nation in places like Bosnia, Kosovo, Germany, Korea, Japan and other far off places around the world. That message is simple, that when you serve our nation we will answer the plea of President Lincoln "to care for him who shall have borne the battle."

I urge my colleagues to vote yes on H.R. 2116 and care for the men and women who have borne the battle.

Mr. PORTMAN. Mr. Speaker, I rise to support H.R. 2116, the Veterans' Millennium Health Care Act of 1999, which is designed to address the long-term health care needs of veterans of the 21st century.

However, I want to express my seniors concerns with a provision of the bill that may unfairly impact a vital nursing home facility proposed to serve veterans in southern Ohio. Specifically, I am concerned with Section 206, the State Home Grant Program, which would only allow projects to be funded in FY 2000 that are on the VA's approved list as of October 29, 1998. The effect of this could be to prevent the federal matching funds next year for a facility in Georgetown, Ohio in Brown County. Ohio's application for the Brown County facility was submitted to VA earlier this summer.

Ohio has a shortfall of more than 4,000 VA nursing home beds and is vastly underserved. In fact, the only VA nursing facility Ohio is located in Sandusky in the northern part of the state, and there are 160 veterans on the waiting list for admission. Of the Sandusky VA facility's 650 residents, only 8 are from southern Ohio. As a result of this shortfall and the need to better serve veterans in southern Ohio, the state committed \$4.5 million for the Brown County project as its share of the construction money in Ohio's FY 2000 budget. The state has also committed \$500,000 for various administrative expenses to see the project to completion for a total of \$5 million in state funds. The federal share needed for the facility is \$7.8 million.

The State of Ohio's financial commitment to the Brown County facility was signed into law by the Governor on June 30, 1999. Ohio's application was submitted to VA on July 22, a month ahead of VA's August 15 deadline for receiving FY 2000 funding applications. As you know, the House recently approved \$90 million for the State Homes Construction Grant program in the FY 2000 VA, HUD, Independent Agencies bill—a \$50 million increase over the President's request which I had worked for in the Appropriations Committee and supported. I am told that a similar amount

is expected to be included in the Senate bill. It is my understanding that Ohio's application should be sufficiently high in priority that the VA, HUD Independent Agencies appropriation would provide the federal funds needed for the Brown County facility in FY 2000. Unfortunately, I am advised by the State of Ohio officials and the VA, that the October 29, 1998 cutoff date in H.R. 2116 will automatically make Ohio's application ineligible for funding next year.

Ohio has acted in good faith to provide the needed \$5 million state match and has spent an additional \$154,000 to prepare the application, which was submitted well within the timetable for FY 2000 funding under VA's current guidelines. I want to add that Brown County has spent \$186,000 of its own funds for land acquisition, an environmental impact study and for other expenses, so there has been a considerable state and local investment in this project.

Of course, the VA still must approve the Brown County application based on its merits. However, it is unfair to change the rules in the middle of this year's application process and preclude Brown County's facility from being funded in FY 2000 as would happen under the current language of H.R. 2116. It is my hope that an equitable solution to this unfortunate situation can be worked out in conference, and I look forward to working with Chairman STUMP, Chairman STEARNS, ranking members EVANS and GUTIERREZ and the Senate to ensure that the veterans in southern Ohio are treated fairly in this process.

Mr. STUPAK. Mr. Speaker, I speak today in support of H.R. 2116, the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act. I would like to commend Chairman STUMP and Ranking Member EVANS on their hard work on this bill, and their work on behalf of America's veterans.

I have a small VA medical facility in my district, Iron Mountain Veterans Medical Center. Under existing law, VA could arbitrarily close this facility, and have come close to doing so in the past. H.R. 2116 would provide protections not available under current law. It would require VA to involve veterans' service organizations, employee unions, and other interested parties. It would require VA to submit the plan and justification to Congress and allow a waiting period of 45 days. These provisions provide for far greater protection than under current law, and allow for the community and individual input which is lacking in current proceedings.

Other notable provisions in H.R. 2116 address issues which have been neglected for too long. Long-term care is expanded; VA's authority to make grants to assist homeless veterans is extended; the criteria for awarding grants to building and remodeling state veteran's homes has been reformed; VA is directed to cover emergency costs for uninsured veterans; it provides for sexual trauma counseling; provides for chiropractic care; it will give the VA access to a portion, if funds are recovered from tobacco companies, to compensate for its costs of tobacco-related illnesses; and it establishes a new health care enrollment category for non-disabled military retirees eligible for Tricare which essentially guarantees these military retirees health care.

The innovative provisions in this bill which make it so responsive to those veterans who have served our country so well is deserving of our support, and I urge my colleagues to

vote for the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act of 1999. I commend the efforts of the Chairman and Ranking Member of the VA Committee, along with the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Health Subcommittee and their staff, of developing this needed piece of legislation.

This health care bill offers many positive improvements, including the expansion of care for long-term nursing, mental health services, emergency and other needed care. It represents a comprehensive and necessary change to keep our VA health care facilities and services in tune with the needs of veterans and the changing health care industry. I urge the Senate to act quickly in passing this bill so we can have it enacted into law this year.

A more fundamental problem we face lies in the funding of such programs, especially for the discretionary health care budget. We can authorize all we want for VA health care. But based on the budget caps set by the House leadership, veterans will be lucky just to avoid having cutbacks in fiscal year 2001 and could face much more drastic cuts in future years. We all want HR 2116, and authorizing bills like it, to expand health care and benefits to veterans and their families. But we must be prepared to bite the bullet and give adequate funding for all veterans services.

Mr. SMITH of Texas. Mr. Speaker, I strongly support H.R. 2116, the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act.

Health care as we know it is changing. New technology allows for better treatment, better diagnosis and greater opportunities than ever before.

But as we approach the 21st century, the Veterans Administration must also change to address the needs of our veterans. This bill accomplishes that objective.

Mr. Speaker, my district contains one of the highest concentrations of veterans in the country. I have held town meetings across my district to listen to their concerns. The veterans I represent have advocated many of the provisions contained in this bill.

From requiring the VA to enlist the help of veterans organizations in developing enhanced service plans, to allowing the VA to contract for needed hospital care, the provisions contained in H.R. 2116 will benefit the VA for years to come.

Mr. KOLBE. Mr. Speaker, I welcome this legislation to meet the health care needs of our veterans and rise to express my support for the Veterans' Millennium Health Care Act. This is the kind of act that will help restore accountability and credibility to the government's reputation with regard to keeping our promise to take care of our nation's veterans.

In Tucson, we eagerly await the groundbreaking of the Tucson VA Medical Center's new outpatient facility. This legislation complements that effort to insure the policy as well as the infrastructure is in place to provide appropriate care for Southern Arizona veterans. Outpatient care delivers more care to greater number at a lower cost. I am pleased to see outpatient care further supported in this bill. With the World War II generation and their sons and daughters entering the later half of their lives, these improvements to long term care is timely and needed.